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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000920

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2017

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SUBJECT: ERITREAN FOREIGN MINISTER ON BILATERAL RELATIONS,
REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Classified By: Ambassador Ron McMullen for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: "Dialogue is an option, but demarcation is an obligation," said Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh Mohammed during a November 30 meeting with the Ambassador and DCM. He said that Eritrea "is not supporting al)Shabaab," adding a warning about (purported) Ethiopian misinformation. The Ambassador outlined American counter-terrorism concerns and consequences for those who support terrorism. The Foreign Minister ended the hour-long discussion by suggesting that perhaps the United States and Eritrea could make progress on resolving "smaller problems" while working toward common ground on the larger issues dividing us. End Summary.

¶2. (U) An Airport Invitation/Summons

The Eritrean protocol director, on greeting the Ambassador on his arrival at Asmara's airport November 28, said the Foreign Minister would like to meet with him the morning of November ¶30. The meeting at the MFA on November 30 began with a briefing by the protocol director, who said the Ambassador would be "officially accredited" to Eritrea upon presentation of a copy of his letter of credence to the Foreign Minister. He also provided detailed instructions on the presentation of credentials to President Isaias, which he said would take place "at a convenient time."

¶3. (C) FM Osman Saleh on Eritrea's Strategic Perspective

After initial courtesies and the presentation of the copy of the Ambassador's letter of credence to Foreign Minister Osman Saleh, conversation flagged. The Ambassador then shared his perspective on the United States' priorities in the Horn of Africa, with strong emphasis on counter-terrorism, including the possible designation of al-Shabaab as a foreign terrorist organization and the potential consequences for Eritrea if it were to be found supporting terrorists in Somalia or elsewhere. The FM listened without interruption, then outlined Eritrea's perspective and priorities. Osman Saleh, speaking fairly good English in a quiet voice, contended that:

-- Eritrea does not want war with Ethiopia; war is destructive and the Eritrean people have suffered for many years.

-- The United States should approach the border issue with "justice" and support international law.

-- "Dialogue is an option, but demarcation is an obligation." No conditions can be set on demarcation; normalization might occur, but demarcation must be undertaken first.

-- The government of Ethiopia is a destabilizing force both inside Ethiopia and in the region.

-- Eritrea is against terrorism and was fighting terrorists before the United States was; Ethiopia harbors the Eritrean Islamic Jihad group in Addis Ababa.

-- Eritrea "is not supporting al-Shabaab;" the United States and the United Nations should be wary of Ethiopian misinformation.

-- Many of the region's problems are interrelated and cannot be solved in isolation.

¶4. (SBU) "Smaller Problems" -----

The Ambassador raised the issues of Eritrean interference with diplomatic pouches, lack of visas for TDYers, and in-country travel restrictions. Osman Saleh allowed that the Vienna Convention was important but opined that it could be implemented somewhat differently from place to place, citing Israel as an example (but when pressed, could provide no specifics). The Foreign Minister concluded the hour-long exchange by saying that if some of these "smaller problems"

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could be resolved, perhaps we could work toward finding common ground on the larger issues facing our two countries.

¶5. (C) Comment -----

As the GSE has ignored British and other Western ambassadors' requests for appointments with the Foreign Minister for the past six months, some observers read the Foreign Minister's prompt meeting with the Ambassador as a favorable sign. Osman Saleh broke no new ground (and the Ambassador was simultaneously being denounced as a spy at a mass political rally elsewhere in Asmara), but the straightforward exchange of views and the Foreign Minister's suggestion that working to resolve small problems could lead to improved cooperation on bigger issues was probably what passes for a cordial GSE welcome in the context of this strained bilateral relationship. End Comment.
MCMULLEN